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Testimony in Pope Case Ends in Sofia

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SOFIA, Bulgaria, Dec. 21 — An Italian court trying to determine whether Bulgaria conspired to assassinate Pope John Paul II returned this week to the city where such a plot was supposedly devised.

But it heard two former Bulgarian diplomats contradict the assertion of Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who shot the Pope and who is the prosecution's key witness, that they were central figures in a plot that led to the attack on May 13, 1981.

The hearings, before television cameras and hundreds of reporters in the conference hall of a downtown hotel, ended the taking of evidence in the seven-month-old Rome trial, which has taken the court on unusual excursions to five countries. When the trial reconvenes in Rome in January, the prosecution and the defense will make final pleas, and the two judges and six jurors will then hand down a verdict.

The testimony seemed unlikely to buttress the prosecution's central contention — that the Bulgarians paid the equivalent of \$1.2 million, presumably at the instigation of the Soviet Union, to have the Polish-born Pope killed.

'For Lack of Evidence'

That does not mean, according to court officials, that the three Bulgarian and four Turkish defendants will be exonerated. Under Italian law, defendants can be acquitted "for lack of evidence." That qualification leaves room for doubt about the innocence of the accused, and many people watching the trial, including Bulgarian officials, believe that will be the court's verdict.

"We would be naïve to think otherwise," said a senior Bulgarian Government official who has followed the trial closely. "After all, this court has the responsibility of protecting, in some way, the integrity of Italian justice."

"Still, we will protest," he added. "We will say it is an injustice."

As a clear-cut resolution of the trial seemed to recede, he made clear that a full-scale propaganda counteroffensive by Bulgaria was likely to follow.

Two Days of Questioning

The Italian court officials spent two days questioning two of three Bulgarian defendants, Lieut. Col. Zhelyo K. Vasilev, 44 years old, the former deputy military attaché at Bulgaria's Embassy in Rome, and Todor S. Aivasov, 42, the former embassy cashier.

Mr. Agca has asserted, in sometimes contradictory and confused testimony, that clandestine meetings to prepare the attack on the Pope took place in the two men's apartments in Rome. He also testified that they had helped procure guns and explosives and a truck to serve as a getaway vehicle after the shooting.

But little emerged in the two days of questioning that had not been covered two years ago, when Judge Ilario Martella, the Rome magistrate whose investigation led to the trial, came here to question the Bulgarians.

In a trial often bogged down in detail and obscure names, the court learned that Colonel Vasilev was kicked by a donkey when he was 9, and that a scar on his chin was from a fall down a flight of stairs.

Mr. Aivasov, echoing denials made by Colonel Vasilev on Friday, told the judges, "I do not know the Turkish citizen Mehmet Ali Agca." He first heard the name, he said, "on the evening after the attempt, or the morning after in the newspapers."

Some New Information

The trial has not been void of disclosures. In more than 100 hearings, new information emerged about Turkish right-wing circles that supported Mr. Agca. That information has spawned a new investigation by two Rome magistrates.

Moreover, the court has delved into other new charges, by a racketeer turned state's witness and a former Italian intelligence official, that Mr. Agca was coached to implicate the Bulgarians. That charge has stirred sympathetic interest here, where the indictment of the Bulgarians has long been viewed as resulting from a campaign by Western intelligence agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency, to smear the Soviet bloc.

For its part, the Bulgarians have answered with a counterinvestigation, concluded last month, to determine whether Mr. Agca is guilty of crimes

against the Bulgarian state, such as slander, a common offense in Communist countries, or violation of Bulgarian customs and border regulations. Mr. Agca entered Bulgaria illegally several times and spent several weeks in Sofia illegally in the summer of 1980.

Iordan Ormanokov, the Bulgarian magistrate who conducted the investigation, said this week that the results had been presented to the prosecutor general. But a decision whether to bring charges against Mr. Agca, in what would be a kind of countertrial to the one in Rome, has been postponed to await further developments regarding the charges of meddling by Western intelligence agencies. The aim of the Bulgarians, by their own admission, is to regain propaganda terrain they feel they have lost through their implication in the attack on the Pope.

Giovanni Pandico, a convicted Naples underworld leader, testified to the Italian court this month that he and other crime figures had helped persuade Mr. Agca to testify against Bulgaria, so as to obtain favors from the intelligence service for a Naples gangland boss.

Italian Jailed in U.S.

At the same time, Francesco Pazienza, a former Italian military intelligence official now in jail in New York for involvement in criminal activities, has also implicated the intelligence services in efforts to coach Mr. Agca.

This week, Mr. Pazienza said he possessed documentary evidence that is part of a cache of documents deposited in a Paris bank. Bulgarian officials have snapped at this straw, and the Sofia News, a Government weekly published in several languages, bore the headline on the day the Italian judges arrived, "Pazienza Talks."

Bulgarian officials, however, said they were awaiting further information about the documents purportedly stored in Paris, for fear that Mr. Pazienza might simply be seeking to blackmail American or Italian officials to prevent his extradition to Italy from the United States.

The former intelligence official was sentenced in his absence by an Italian court this year for trying to subvert Italy's intelligence service. He faces further Italian charges of involvement in a 1981 bomb attack on the Bologna train station in which 85 people were killed.